

Sofia Mock

### The Unconventional World of Dani

Dani wakes up every morning with words tickling his mind. He keeps a small notebook by his bed. Its fatigued cover hides bent pages that overflow with tiny slices of his dreams, of his consciousness. He later takes these thoughts and turns them into poetry. As he recites the poems to me he steals quick, shaky breaths. It is as though the words weaken him, as though they are soaked in his truths and steal away little parts of him when he releases them into the air.

The first time I met Dani he was 17 and drawing in that same weathered notebook during our lunch break at school. I have a poem that he wrote later about this moment on aged brown paper. It was my second week living in Alicante, Spain as a high school exchange student, and I was immediately drawn to him. The concrete benches outside the classroom overflowed with students frantically studying for tests, laughing about pictures from the party last week, chattering excitedly about weekend plans. He sat still, calmly squished between two arguing boys, unfazed by the teenage mayhem that surrounded him. He was drawing a cartoon woman with a long neck and I remember him expertly gathering her hair into a bun with a few swift strokes of his pen. I was struck by his full eyebrows, high cheekbones and sharp jawline, softened by the goofy way he smiled to himself as he drew, as if enjoying a private joke. I approached him, and he looked up at me, still smiling. As we talked I felt like he was laughing at every mistake in my broken Spanish. I later learned that he just liked to laugh.

I didn't see him at school much in the following week. When I texted him one day he told me that he had woken up that morning, felt that he had changed, and needed to figure out who he was again. That week he went on several 2am walks in the rain. Then he dropped out of school.

Because of our initial language barrier, it took me some time to realize that Dani lived in a fantasy world. When we were in the library he imagined gravity reversing and us sitting on the ceiling. When we went to parties he imagined the couches eating the people who sat on them. These moments of “imagine if...” filled our conversations. I thought for a while that I had trouble following Spanish conversations in general, but I realized at some point that the things Dani said just made no sense.

"Careful Sofia! The small child is dangerous. We must proceed with caution. It's going to explode into candies and then the candies explode into children. That's how it reproduces." He dreams of creating a cartoon series, somewhere to deposit this crazy world that he lives in, where flies lick him as if they were dogs and he cultivates cows so that the grass can eat them.

Dani finds beauty in the veins of leaves, in shapes of cracks in the sidewalk, in freckles and clouds. Over the year that we spent together, he convinced me of the richness of such details, and I began to collect little details about him. When he closes his eyes at night he imagines countrysides. One of his ears is slightly larger than the other (he smiled as he told me that I was the only person who had ever noticed that). He speaks rhythmically, his voice low and soothing. It makes his occasionally crude teenaged vernacular sound like poetry. He likes to eat raw mushrooms straight out of the bag. As my list grew, I learned that he had a similar list about me. Green eyes. Pink shirts. Likes old jazz. Introspective. Impatient.

I didn't bring many clothes to Spain, and in a moment of desperation I asked Dani if I could borrow some of his. He appeared at my front door about ten minutes later with a bag full of the weirdest shirts he owned along with a pair of mustard yellow pants. The shirt on the top of the pile was striped red and green with the illuminati symbol prominently displayed on the front.

I had no choice but to wear them. When I finally found the time to go clothes shopping he would always come with me so that he could look at all of the colors. He would touch every piece of fabric in the store.

For outings such as these, our mode of transportation was Dani's rusty bike with large tires. We rode it together, me sitting on the seat and Dani, who is about four inches shorter than I am, sitting on the handlebars.

"The trick is pushing the pedal with lots of force when you start," he would tell me, "Be fearless!" One day we were biking to my band rehearsal when he suddenly said "Stop!" The brakes squealed and he hopped off the handlebars. "Think about this exact moment that we are in, you and me together wearing these clothes, surrounded by these people, with the wind blowing in this particular way and the sun hitting us from this angle. This will never happen again. Just enjoy it for a second."

After my rehearsal we biked back to his house for some tea. He brought me a stack of tea boxes that was about half his size: Manzanilla, Tila, Menta, Te Verde... He explained the pros and cons of each flavor. Five Camel cigarette packs were stuck in a line on the wall above his bed, each a different color. He knew that smoking was a nasty habit, but it made him feel balanced. Drawings of strange cartoon characters littered the floor. Some had been secured with thumbtacks to the spray painted yellow wall. I have a polaroid picture of him with a little half smile in front of that wall. He wrote on the back in sharpie: "Here you have my greatest fear: being forgotten."

Even so, it seemed that Dani sought to know rather than be known. We spent Friday nights at the plaza, wading through seas of perfumed people whose voices rose above the

reggaeton that vibrated the walls of nearby clubs. I would often lose him, only to find him talking with strangers, his gaze fixed on them as though they were the most fascinating people he had ever met. Once I found him strumming a guitar in the middle of a group of female musicians. They wore long red capes with patches from their travels. He stayed until he had thoroughly examined every patch.

Dani always had white paint under his nails, the residue from graffiti splattered on all of his clothes. On a walk around Alicante I would see his tag on the sides of countless buildings, a swirly white rendition of his made-up word “Hosped”. It comes from the Spanish word “huésped”, he explained to me, which means guest, because his tags are “guests in the streets”. He saw the homeless people of Alicante, much like his tags, as “guests in the streets”. Though his family sometimes struggled to put food on the table, he would often bring food to share with homeless people who lived around his building, trading a meal for their stories or a game of chess.

The night before I left Alicante, Dani took me to his favorite spot in the city. We hiked up Castillo Santa Barbara, a large castle that overlooked the city, to a large hidden rock. We sat in silence for what must have been hours, watching people walk along the cobblestone streets below and the sea that seemed to melt into the sky, one endless inky puddle. Through the window of a nearby building we could see the silhouettes of two people dancing. We lay side by side on the cold stone until the sun rose.

It’s been more than a year now since I last saw Dani. I have a folder full of letters and poems and drawings from him, all covered in his elegant calligraphy. Even now, I sometimes think of him around 10pm; it was the time that we always went on walks together. I would come

down to meet him much later than we had agreed on but he never cared. The scene unfolds in my memory like a painting. Dani lies on his back on top of a marble bench across from my apartment with his eyes closed and his phone on his belly, freestyle rapping to a beat that he composed himself. He wears a white fleece jacket that appears yellow under the street lights. Hearing my footsteps, he sits up, smiles that goofy smile, and says “Sofia, I think I understand who I am now.”